

Raising a Responsible Drinker

TEACHING YOUR KIDS HOW TO ENJOY ALCOHOL SAFELY SHOULD BEGIN LONG BEFORE THEY'RE INVITED TO THEIR FIRST FRAT PARTY. HERE'S HOW TO START THOSE POTENTIALLY LIFESAVING CONVERSATIONS.

By Sharlene Breakey



"I'M NOT REALLY LISTENING," says Zeke, grinning at me while I try to impart yet another surprising stat I've discovered about teens and alcohol. These days my 17-year-old has been hearing a lot on the topic of drinking as we tour college campuses and he strides more confidently away from us at each one.

The thing is, he's a great kid. Unless I'm deluding myself, I don't think he drinks now—at least not much. But who really knows? And his looming birthday (not to mention memories of my own boozy college years) has let loose lurking fears about his safety. Every college brochure that hits our mailbox hits me like a Mack truck. Where he sees bucolic pictures of the grassy quad, I see a world of bingeing and beer bong.

Because no matter how thoughtful teenagers might be, they are still heading off to college with an underdeveloped brain and an overdeveloped desire to court danger. With frontal lobes that won't be fully grown until around age 30, they're simply less able to make smart decisions in the moment, says France Jensen, MD, chair of neurology at the University of Pennsylvania. It's no wonder *my* brain is in overdrive too.

Though most parents don't start addressing alcohol until their kids are teens, experts say we should be talking about it long before. From an early age, kids are paying attention—to everything.

Most important, they witness our behavior. But they're also bombarded by Super Bowl ads and "wine o'clock" memes on social media. "There's a belief that if we'd just relax about alcohol, people wouldn't drink so much, but that's not the case," says Aaron White, PhD, scientific adviser to the director of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Kids who start drinking by 13 or 14 are at the highest risk of developing an alcohol disorder as adults.

Experts say that if you begin to address the topic of alcohol *before* your kids get curious, you can have a much bigger impact than you might expect: A 2016 GfK Roper Youth Report shows that parents are by far the leading influence on a teen's decision to drink or not drink. "Parents should have dozens to hundreds of conversations about alcohol with their kids," says Deborah Gilboa, MD, author of *Get the Behavior You Want...Without Being the Parent You Hate*. "Forget the big sit-down. Small, repetitive talks can change landscapes." Here's what to say.



Little Kids

Toddlers and preschoolers are highly attuned to the grown-up world, making this the ideal age range for starting the conversation. "The first time an opportunity arises, jump on it—the same way you would if your child was about to grab a match," says Gilboa.

WHAT TO SAY: Keep it simple, advises Laura Markham, PhD, author of *Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids*. "Just say, 'Wine is for grown-ups. It's not for you.'"

BE A ROLE MODEL: Now is the time to consider your own alcohol use—and begin to moderate it if necessary. If you want to have a cocktail, though, don't wait until the kids go to bed to indulge. "That just makes it a taboo," says Markham. "Let them see alcohol as a normal part of life while being clear that there are rules: It's not OK to drink until you're 21."

TEACHABLE MOMENT: When Uncle Jack asks your daughter to get him a beer, overrule the order. "Calmly explain, 'Alcohol can be a dangerous thing, and I don't want it to be comfortable for you,'" says Gilboa.

Parents—not friends—are the leading influence on whether a teen drinks.

School-Age Kids

Kids in grade school are fascinated with their bodies, so weave alcohol into a broader conversation about health. "Let them know that alcohol is safe for adults in small doses but that there are times when it's not healthy, especially when our brains are developing," says White.

WHAT TO SAY: "On a bike you wear a helmet, and at your age you never drink alcohol"—this makes it all about safety. "Keep it an issue about toxins, not addiction," says Gilboa. "It's enough to say that alcohol will make your brain and liver not grow the way they're supposed to."

BE A ROLE MODEL: When you let your partner take the wheel after you've had a cocktail, point out that you never drink and drive. And when kids ask for a sip? Don't assume that the bad taste will be a deterrent, says Gilboa: "Kids who were given sips by adults they trust were four times as likely to binge-drink later."

TEACHABLE MOMENT: Help your kids find answers from reliable sources, says Gilboa. "If they ask, 'What does alcohol do to a kid's brain?' search together on sites like pediatrics.org and responsibility.org."



Tweens

Tweens smell hypocrisy a mile away; you have to be certain your behavior matches your words.

WHAT TO SAY: "A lot of people might not think you're ready for this conversation, but I know you are." Tell your tween that even if he hasn't been offered alcohol yet, you know he will be in the future, and you're here to help him be smart about it.

BE A ROLE MODEL: Next time you have a friend over for a cocktail, instead of saying, "I need a drink," ask, "Should we have a glass of wine?" Otherwise, kids will get the message that alcohol is your go-to stress reliever. "You don't want to model that it's a way to handle anxiety," says Markham. Ask for a hug before you head to the wet bar.

TEACHABLE MOMENT: If your kid asks why someone in the family doesn't drink and the reason is alcoholism, explain that because of genetics, your family is at a higher risk of developing a problem with alcohol. "Compare it to heart disease: In the same way people need to avoid junk food to stay healthy, your family needs to be more careful with alcohol," says Gilboa.

Teens

The message teens need to hear: Safety first. "Teens shape their behavior based on clear expectations from parents, so even if you don't get a gratifying response right away, that doesn't mean it wasn't a successful conversation," says Lisa Damour, PhD, author of *Untangled: Guiding Teenage Girls Through the Seven Transitions into Adulthood*.

WHAT TO SAY: "Never warn, 'Don't let me catch you drinking!'" says Damour. "That just makes it a cat-and-mouse game." Instead, say, "Don't focus on not getting caught; focus on not getting hurt." Also, make it clear you're there for them. Say, "If you find yourself scared or uncomfortable in a car your friend is driving, call us." Jensen suggests you rehearse scenarios together. "Ask, 'If you're at a party and someone says, 'Try this Jell-O shot,' what do you do?'" In the moment, an immature brain is no match for peer pressure; having a practiced response can make it a fairer fight.

And when your teen leaves for college, "tell him your expectations haven't changed and the stakes are even higher now," says Ralph Blackman, CEO of the Foundation for Advancing Alcohol Responsibility.

BE A ROLE MODEL: When you have a drink at dinner, continue the talk about context. "Call out the healthy decisions you make around

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your own habits—like not drinking and driving, never bingeing, and drinking only with people you feel safe with," says Damour.

TEACHABLE MOMENT: While teens tend to reveal less about themselves than they used to, they *may* talk about others. If your daughter says, "Jane was at a party throwing up everywhere," that's your cue to say, "That's pretty scary. Why do you think she drank so much?" And if you have one too many one night, it can be a good lead-in to a discussion about how easy it is to do stupid things, especially when we're hyped up—then tie it to the first weeks of college. See if you can get your teen to make a pact to wait to drink. Sell it as a chance to watch other people make silly mistakes so he can figure out how not to make the same ones.